What role for officer training on the campuses of our elite universities?

Can the Vietnam-era controversy inform today's student protests and faculty debates?

Is the law wise to force ROTC on unwilling institutions under threat of loss of federal funds?

Most participants in the current debate argue from ideological principles or moral propositions.

This article instead starts from the actual 1960s experience of one ROTC graduate, with real historical consequences for America.

ROTC at Harvard

One Man's Experience by JEFFREY RACE

Over the years my view has fluctuated as to the wisdom of involvement with imperfect human institutions, whether marriage, military service, commercial enterprise or religious community. With the perspective of four decades, I can now look back on my ROTC experience to see how it changed me and how it changed America. I offer no conclusion for the general proposition, only for my own case—blazingly clear to me at least.

Let me explain how it all happened.

As a result of the events recounted here the author has commuted between Boston and Asia ever since graduation.. Articles mentioned in the text may be seen at ‹https://www.jeffreyrace.com/studies/publ_01.htm›

Fairfield County—Where It Started

Except for pastoral portraits in novels, a more wholesome place to enjoy one's youth is hardly imaginable than this Connecticut county one hour from New York. Our creaky pre-revolutionary home lacked right angles, but I walked to a school with caring teachers, a sound curriculum, spacious classrooms and none of our present-day social pathologies. Adults aimed for their best whether in behavior, speech or dress, and I recall no one ever committing a dishonest public act or uttering a witting falsehood. (Thus was I ill-prepared for what lay ahead when I left at 18.) Our college-bound gang hung out together doing fun things now seen as dated oddities in 1950s films. I vividly recall my first girlfriend (then a term of innocent affection) taking me to a rock concert—how shocked I was by the sounds from the stage, the behavior of the performers, and most of all by the reaction of the youthful audience.

Oh, the politics: among my acquaintances I recall but two Democrats, a Public Health Service physician and his nursing-trained wife. Their son and I were best friends—we later came to Harvard together—and it was always such fun to visit his home because of the parallel universe in which his family lived.

From Panglossia to Cambridge

Like many of us arriving at the Harvard freshman dorms in September of 1961, I grew alarmed within minutes of unpacking. My middle-class family drove a Volkswagen. While I felt secure in our economic ordinariness, I was an academic whiz, having graduated valedictorian of a class of 500. But my roommate came in a luxury car having excelled at one of American's most illustrious public schools; his similarly-advantaged friends socialized with graduates of New England private academies of awesome repute.

My fright rose several notches the next day with our dean's 'welcome' in the beautiful old Sanders Theater, cautioning that many of us ("look to your left and look to your right") would not survive the four years ahead.

I decided to calibrate myself: do nothing but study, rabidly, until first term grades arrived.

Amidst this mental turmoil I faced the option to add a half-course of ROTC.

My father had urged, and I had successfully resisted, joining the Boy Scouts. Harvard in 1961 however presented a comparable grown-up option, which in the context of then-universal male military service seemed a terrific choice, if I could handle the work. I signed up—and was puzzled why more did not.

ROTC offered three types of activities, some more impressive to me than others.

First, academic studies of military science, mostly stressing military history and the psychology of leadership. The former bored me, but leadership training instilled a vital and hardly intuitive truth: leadership means inspiring willing cooperation, and becoming a leader means building the inner moral strength and personal capacity to inspire others.

Second, parade drill. Never having been a team sport enthusiast, only then did I begin to see what my life had lacked: precision, teamwork, instant response in anticipation of what in later life would be life-critical situations (like combat in Vietnam or personal safety emergencies in civil life).

Third, field trips. One still in mind was to the Army Aviation School in Alabama. After a day viewing the base we dined and danced with the local belles. That was different from Fairfield County, and even more from Cambridge!

Even with a 4-1/2 course load, term one turned out well: tops in everything. I became as confident as my classmates from elite high schools and stuck with ROTC.

"You Will Have The Power of Life and Death"

Summer camp at Fort Devens in 1964 differed from anything before. I had never been isolated from my family for so long. and having led a personally tidy life, I had never been sleep-deprived. But we were the first night as we took apart our barracks heating system to remove every spot of dust and reassembled it before daybreak . . . and again sleep-deprived many eves again as we learned night navigation skills and map-reading.

But most memorably we were 'welcomed' on

THE
PRESIDENT
OF
THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To all who shall see these presents, greeting:

Know Ye, that reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity and abilities of Jeffrey Race *, I do appoint* him a Reserve Commissioned Officer *in the*

Army of the United States

to date *as such from the* sixteenth *day of* June *, nineteen hundred and* sixty-five *. This Officer will therefore carefully and diligently discharge the duties of the office to which appointed by doing and performing all manner of things thereunto belonging.*

And I do strictly charge and require those Officers and other personnel of lesser rank to render such obedience as is due an officer of this grade and position. And this Officer is to observe and follow such orders and directions, from time to time, as may be given by me, or the future President of the United States of America, or other Superior Officers, acting in accordance with the laws of the United States of America.

This commission is to continue in force during the pleasure of the President of the United States of America, for the time being, under the provisions of those Public Laws relating to Officers of the Armed Forces of the United States of America *and the component thereof in which this appointment is made.*

Done at the City of Washington, this sixteenth *day of* June *, in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and* sixty-five *, and of the Independence of the United States of America the one hundred and* eighty-ninth.

By the President:

J. G. Lambert
Major General
The Adjutant General.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
WAR OFFICE

Stephen Ailes
Secretary of the Army

our first day with a message comparable in impact to our dean's welcome in 1961. Still cadets, we ranked even below enlisted soldiers. The old drill sergeant over us told us that upon commissioning in a year, we would out-rank him and could issue him legal orders. His words as best I can recall:

> "Today you are cadets. A year from now you will be officers. You will have the authority to issue orders which can mean life or death for your men. Issuing orders sounds easy, but it isn't. The first skill you must learn, before you can issue orders, is to take orders. That is why you are here."

This got my full attention. I have never forgotten this simple talk as we stood in ranks before our barracks, and I see in looking back that it really began the process of moving me from the simplicities of youth to the responsibilities of adulthood.

To All Who Shall See These Presents, Greeting

On a fine June morning in 1965 Harvard's president welcomed me to the company of educated men, and on that same afternoon my father (a major during the Second World War) proudly pinned lieutenant's bars on my shoulders, making up to some extent for my missing the Boy Scouts all those years. I was soon presented with my officer's commission, a physically large and imposing document in the name of the President, worded:

> "Know Ye, that reposing special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities of Jeffrey Race, I do appoint him a Reserve Commissioned Officer in the Army of the United States . . . . This officer will therefore carefully and diligently discharge the duties of the office to which appointed . . . ."

It went on, just as the sergeant had declared:

> "And I do strictly charge and require those officers and other personnel of lesser rank to render such obedience as is due an officer of this grade and position."

My Harvard Degree Really Pays Off

Majoring in government I had studied with Henry Kissinger and other greats, but as an inveterate electronics hobbyist I had selected the Signal Corps as my military branch. Having studied German I expected posting to a communications unit in that country for two years. But when in early July I drove to the Signal School in Georgia the order in my pocket directed me to proceed to a "classified destination" which took little figuring to figure out: I was going to Vietnam, in the 69th Signal Battalion, the largest communications unit in the Army, tasked (as I later learned) to install the communications infrastructure for the enormous troop buildup then in motion but not yet publicized.

These events little concerned me, seemingly normal under the circumstances of Cold War proxy conflict and proportionate to others undertaken for friendly nations. There was then a campaign at Harvard contesting the wisdom of a further U.S. troop commitment, but lacking personal knowledge on which to base such an objection I paid it no heed. With the trust-instilling experiences of Fairfield County, I fully confided in my leaders and recall being quite offended at the presumption of another dean in telling us at a final assembly that Vietnam was a "bum war".

At this time Army policy barred anyone with less than six months of duty from assignment to a war zone. Since I would have served but two months by September when my unit sailed away, I received new orders transferring me from the 69th. I was not going to Vietnam.

Until my commanding officer called me in to say he had seen the order and immediately phoned the Pentagon to have it rescinded as an exception to policy. "Why?" I asked.

"*I want a Harvard man in my battalion.*"

And so a single line in my personnel record changed my life, my profession, my marriage, my continent of residence, and my path through world events. Here begin the implications of that life for the contentious issue of officer training at Harvard and other elite universities.

The Most Junior Officer

On September 30, 1965, burdened with duffel bag and weapon, I jumped into the water from a landing craft at Vungtau and waded ashore to Vietnam. We were then flown to the newly cleared Long Binh base 35 miles north of Saigon.

As the most junior lieutenant in the whole country I became the battalion's Sanitation Officer under the policy of "rank has its privilege": I was in charge of toilets. Much to the amusement of my fellow lieutenants I showed during my first night's inspection how much I had learned at Harvard by falling headlong into an open-trench latrine. (A few days later I had my own laugh in return. My West Point tent-mate had carelessly placed us in a shallow depression on the newly cleared soil. A heavy rain after midnight filled our pup-tent with mud and we had to move in the midst of the storm.)

Shortly I became a platoon leader at the Saigon airport responsible for communications between the Military Assistance Command in Saigon and up-country military units.

In truth that was my day job. As my first stop in life outside the United States, Vietnam was so shockingly different from anything I had seen that I became consumed with learning everything possible about the country, its people, and its war. Already I had studied the language with a set of tapes bought before departing the U.S. (It turned out that in 23 days aboard ship I had learned the northern rather than the southern dialect, but that was fine as it was comparable to learning BBC rather than New York English.) A friendly Vietnamese lieutenant coached me in his tongue, and I gradually fell in with a circle of Vietnamese intellectuals, including courageous newspaper editor Ton That Thien, rather than carousing in the evenings with my service colleagues. The more I studied (and I became quite fluent in Vietnamese) the more curiousity-filled I became.

October of 1966 arrived and so my return to the U.S. upon completion of the year's obligated war-zone duty. However I was really just starting a fascinating adventure which I could hardly continue were I to leave, nor could I do well were I to stay in the capital city. I sought infantry qualification to join a rural advisory team and volunteered to remain for a second tour of duty if I could in this way transfer out of Saigon, to be near our Vietnamese hosts and far from Americans forces.

Through a friendly general officer, having local language skill and again with "Harvard" in my record, this unusual transfer was approved. I became the last member of the last rural advisory team to be emplaced in Vietnam; we were posted to an area so remote and insecure that we could enter only by helicopter. The five of us—my team chief the major, myself, and three sergeants—lived with two hundred Vietnamese militiamen in a small compound enclosed by barbed wire. At night we could walk only to the barbed wire; during the day we could pass another hundred yards to the village market. Beyond that we could travel only with the local troops on civil affairs or combat operations.

Our Vietnamese counterpart Captain Duc ended in this hellhole for declining to bribe the province chief for a safe and remunerative posting elsewhere (something unimaginable to me coming from Fairfield County). Duc and I talked a lot, and here I met and interviewed my first communists (prisoners and defectors), real ones I could reach out to touch, not parlor revolutionaries as seen at Harvard. I learned much from them, and from the good Captain. I still cherish the handmade wooden box he gave me on my departure. He was killed in action shortly after I left.

Something Wrong with This Picture!

When I arrived in Vietnam in 1965 the conflict's moral dimension had not yet acquired the clarity manifest by the 1970s. But after two years in country one thing *was* clear: little was happening according to the military's script, roughly "We treat nicely those who help us; the rest we suppress. As time goes by opposition will lessen; our friends will triumph; we will go home." In fact the opposite was occurring: the harder we tried, the worse the violence. For anyone with a tidy mind, that was very troubling.

No one could tell me why this was so. People

were dying all around me, some of them my friends. I began to suspect Fairfield County's wisdom of trust. Had our dean been right?

What Would Tolstoy Say?

The burning issue—both human and intellectual—was why our local allies were losing influence daily despite hundreds of thousands of helpful foreign troops and a blank check for military and economic aid, when their communist-led opponents were going from weakness to strength with no foreign troops or air cover and pitiful military assistance. Our government gave reasons plainly nonsense on their face ("the villagers are forced by the terrorists") but no serious person could offer a plausible explanation.

In fact Count Tolstoy had put it well a century before. In *War and Peace* he wrote "Napoleon commanded an army to be raised, and to march out to war . . . the question [is] why six hundred thousand men go out to fight when Napoleon utters certain words . . . ."

Determined to answer this question in Vietnam, I elected to return on my own after completing my two years of required active service. I retained my commission and planned to continue performing two weeks of reserve training annually. This decision eventually produced unforeseen results.

In July of 1967 I arrived back in Saigon as a freelance journalist and spent the next year researching a case study of how this puzzling process of government collapse and revolutionary advance had actually taken place over the previous decade in Long An province just south of Saigon. One province was a manageable area in which to uncover the answer, which turned out to be trivially simple and well known in the field of organization theory; it had simply never been applied before to the context of revolutionary war. Early results appeared in a 1970 issue of the scholarly journal *Asian Survey* under the title "How They Won". Provocative as the title appeared (in fact defeat would not be officially conceded for five more years), its most unwelcome aspect to policy-makers and the reason for the ensuing furore was that (in the midst of a political debate highly charged with emotion in the U.S.) the case was meticulously documented and dispassionately presented by a former U.S. military advisor.

Some gentlemanly hate mail came my way from American military officers and I silently suffered vilification from highly placed civilians like Robert Komer (who seriously asked one general who had helped me on my research whether I had in fact ever visited Long An province). Then back at Harvard pursuing a doctorate in political science, I published my final results in book form in 1972 under the title *War Comes to Long An*; it was the lead book review in the *New York Times* the following Sunday. A year later I submitted an expanded version as my doctoral dissertation.

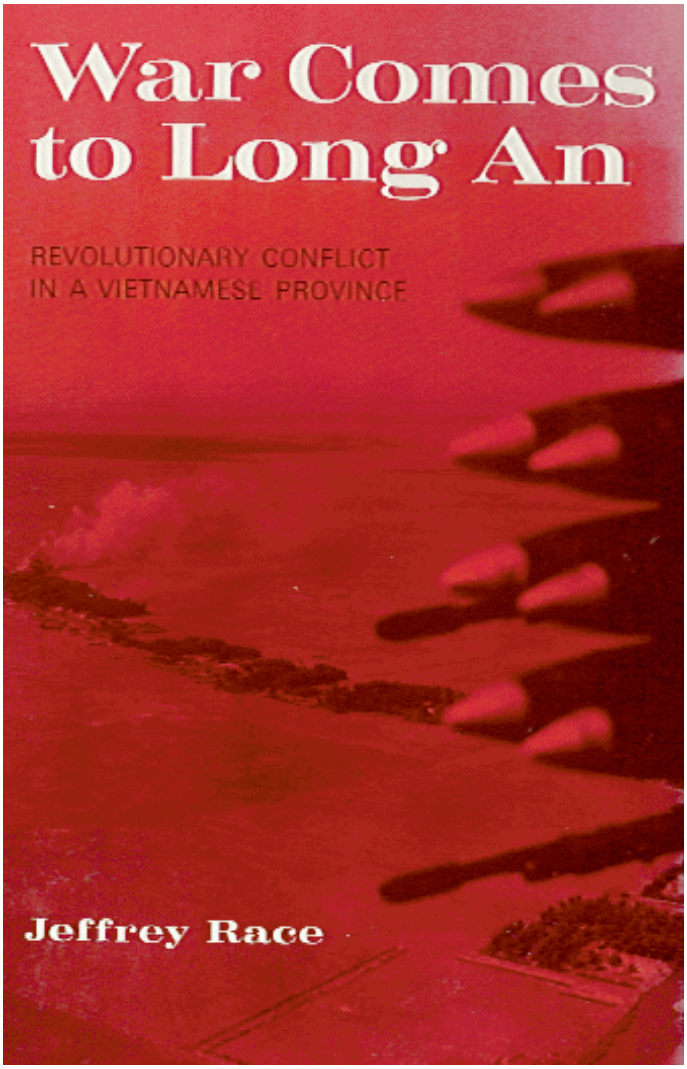
Hidden in My Basement

In September of 1970, invited to join a panel at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting, I offered a paper based on my field research. Still a graduate student duly humbled by the eminence of fellow panelists (Roger Hilsman, Ray Tanter, Alan Whiting, Samuel Huntington, Daniel Ellsberg) I yet made bold at an after-panel dinner to suggest the APSA itself sponsor a serious study of the manifest pathology of Vietnam policy-making. Ellsberg spoke up to say "But the study has already been done. It's in a safe in Washington. All you have to do is get it." In fact this was the first public mention of what later became famous as the Pentagon Papers. (Years after I wrote about these events in the academic journals *Armed Forces and Society* and the *Yale Review*.)

Ellsberg and I grew better acquainted when he moved from the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica to MIT in Cambridge. One day as I pedalled home from class, he pulled alongside in his BMW and asked to store something in my basement while he travelled out of town. I pedalled on, met him on the porch, and helped carry a dozen sealed boxes to my cellar. Some months later, while myself abroad, he came by to retrieve them from my parents and then disappeared. I figured out from the ensuing headlines that I had been living atop these precious documents.

I was later scheduled to testify at Ellsberg's trial but this never came to pass due to the dismissal of his case for governmental misconduct.

While the *Times*' enthusiastic praise of *War Comes to Long An* was a terrific emotional rush for a graduate student drone like myself, I was proudest of the review in *The Economist*: "A remarkably compassionate and honest book." Second for me was the *Marine Corps Gazette*'s review: "Mr. Race does not appear to espouse views either for or against the American effort in Southeast Asia and is only concerned with presenting the facts from both sides along with detailed analyses of key events and time periods." While eventually coming to hold decided views, I had judged it unfair to impose on others so purposely hid them with a particular aim in mind—an aim ultimately successful.



Somewhat to my surprise leaders in the anti-war movement such as Noam Chomsky drew on my work in talks, articles and books, and still do to this day.

And Now the Funny Part

As the leaders of our Vietnam effort retired, died off or gained promotions from the brilliance of their work, something funny happened: *War Comes to Long An* became the official canonical explanation of how America had lost the war. It appears in the curriculum of all the senior U.S. military schools; after 30 years I continue to receive royalties for reproduction rights from universities around the world, from the U.S. military and from the Central Intelligence Agency.

Nor is it just read as a course requirement and forgotten. Some years back a friend on the White House staff confided that he had circulated extracts to colleagues planning *something* (he didn't say what) *somewhere* (I guessed Latin America from headlines at the time). He went on to say "A lot of people are alive today who would be dead if you had not written that book."

Not Just Vietnam

Although on paper I was still a signal officer, in fact my military advisory background and experience in political, economic and strategic analysis had led to a series of unusual assignments during my two weeks of annual reserve duty. Living in Asia I should have served there to cut travel costs, and in fact one year I did at the Bangkok headquarters of the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). But as I became better known I came to be requested by name to serve on high-level Army or Defense Department staffs in Washington, in fact being flown back for two weeks as an exception to budget guidelines despite my junior rank.

In 1984 I was living in Thailand, self-employed advising multinational firms with operations in Southeast Asia, particularly on the Philippines where both communist-led and Islamic insurgencies were combining with the corrupt misrule of President Ferdinand Marcos, and his friends and family, to tear the country apart. At risk were our most important military

bases in Asia, Subic Bay and Clark Field. If this game proceeded further along the same path, a tragedy must occur with incalculable strategic, political and human costs. This was no secret, so a debate raged in Washington between those attached to Marcos and those who felt he must go.

From my Vietnam research I had become known to a group of Young Turks in the Philippine military and to some high-ranking establishment figures in Marcos' government as well.

And so it happened that in September of 1984 orders came to fly to Washington to join a multi-agency team tasked with devising a plan to handle President Marcos and to avert the catastrophe many saw coming. Working intensely together we composed what a few months later President Reagan signed as National Security Decision Directive 163, "U.S. Policy Towards the Philippines". Our team had considered the raging policy debate and decided to word the draft in a clever way to gain agreement from both sides (roughly, to sink with Marcos, or to risk a leadership change) but which would in fact work in only one way—a mouse trap, let us call it—were our draft to be adopted as policy.

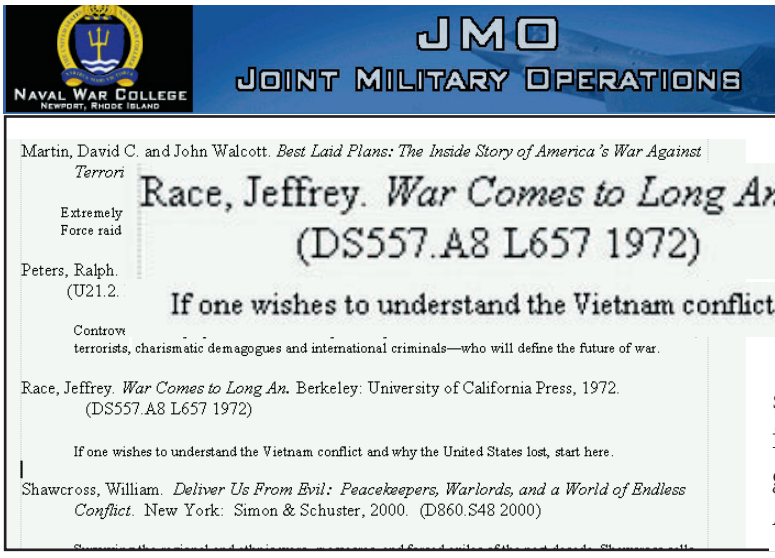
The entire document was quite comprehensive so we divided up our tasks. I had principal responsibility for devising the mouse trap. On my last duty day my supervisor called me in to say "If this plan works it will be wonderful, but if it fails I cannot tell the President that a reserve major drafted this." I flew back to Bangkok in good spirits, confident my education and experience had been well used and that momentous events must soon unfold.

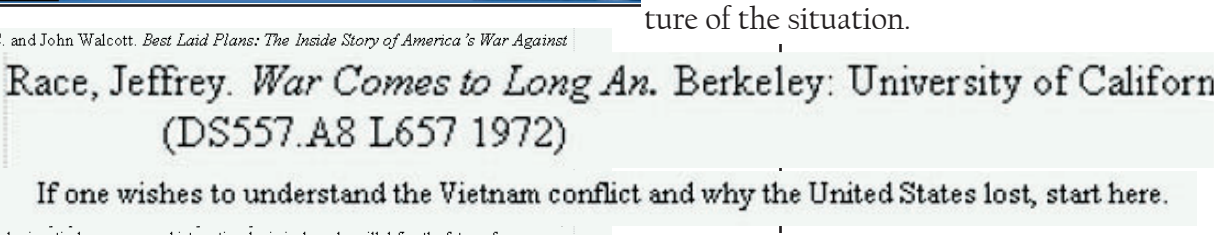
As expected the Philippine political and security situation continued to deteriorate, exacerbating a Washington policy debate paralyzed over the risk of moving for regime change in Manila, a reasonable concern after doing so in 1963 Vietnam had led to the murder of President Diem, a downward spiral of coups and counter-coups, and ultimate ejection of American influence.

The foreign policy establishment (State, Congress, the military, intelligence agencies) busily circulated papers on what action to take, if any. In this maelstrom Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, on the hot seat in Manila, judged he needed more ammunition for the fight that was about to engulf the Oval Office. He decided to go outside "the system".

And so mid-way through 1985 an old Vietnam hand then posted to our embassy in Bangkok called to ask me to fly to Manila, receive a briefing from Ambassador Bosworth and then spend a month diagnosing the dynamics of the situation and forecasting what lay ahead. I asked why I had been selected when so many skilled official analysts were at hand. His reply: "You are known for not telling the boss what he wants to hear. That is why we want you."

I accepted the project because it would be easy for me and I was sure I could diagnose the situation lucidly and persuasively, helping at the very least to avert a tragedy from misunderstanding of the possibilities or of the structure of the situation.





A month's close study in the Philippines showed there was no risk at all in continuing to support Marcos: catastrophe was guaranteed. I submitted my report to Ambassador Bosworth. A short time later

he was called to Washington for an unusual private meeting directly with President Reagan. He told me afterward he had discussed my conclusions in this meeting. And so we were able to crystallize the options realistically before us, advancing yet another step in the process begun with NSDD 163.

By February of 1986, the NSDD plan clearly unfolding, I decided I could not miss the great drama I had helped to script, so flew to join two consulting colleagues in Manila. Because of earlier contacts with both the Young Turks and Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, and my colleagues' varied high-level contacts, we were able to contribute bridges of trust between actors who now suddenly had to cooperate in the rush of events, never having worked together or in some cases even having known each other before. As the drama ended we were pleased and relieved at Marcos' departure, perhaps like a doctor upon a successful live birth.

I had been present at two previous turning points in Asian politics: the 1968 Tet attacks in Vietnam and the 1973 collapse of the military dictatorship in Thailand. Now I was favored to view a third from a distance of a few feet: the moment on February 23rd on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) when Philippine Marine armored personnel carriers momentarily halted before a dozen Catholic nuns lying across the roadway (in the very front of a crowd of tens of thousands who had come into the streets). After a brief standoff and shouted threats and warnings, the lead vehicle roared its engine, leapt forward to crush the nuns—and stopped. In the instant a moment later when Butz Aquino, brother of the assassinated Senator Benigno Aquino, leapt atop the vehicle, it became apparent that President Marcos was finished. Which was of course the plan.

The Manila airport had been closed for some time, but it reopened quickly after Marcos left for Hawaii two days later. I returned to Boston on the first plane out.

What Does It All Mean?

The preceeding are but some of the adventures ROTC opened up for me, but they sufficed to allow me in my quiet way to bring clarity to troubling public issues, applying skills honed at Harvard to the opportunities for closeness to history provided by my choice to join the Reserve Officer Training Corps. Lives have been saved, and tragedies averted, because of what I made of those opportunities. I believe the world would be a better place were more graduates of elite universities to take up opportunities comparable to mine. In three decades of active and reserve military service I was never pressed to violate my ideals. At the same time my fellow officers were highly trained, highly motivated, and filled with integrity fully up to the standard I had been taught in Fairfield County—and which is so lacking in many areas of public life today.

Despite tales alleging the blood-thirsty nature of the officer corps and the belligerence lent to foreign policy by the military, in fact I found that no one is more cautious of risking lives than he who has personally experienced weapons fired in anger. Today I wear with pride in my lapel a miniature Combat Infantryman's Badge.

I look back on my military service as an unusual opportunity for personal and professional growth in challenging circumstances differing greatly from what I experienced in my other work as academic, management consultant and business entrepreneur. Such experience lends not just maturity but also a gravitas, a seriousness, a credibility, hard to obtain otherwise. On whatever side of an issue, men like John Kerry, Richard Armitage and Daniel Ellsberg speak with an authority gained from intimacy with the challenges great and small of military service.

And so I look forward to the day when I may pin my carefully saved lieutenant's bars on the shoulders of someone for whom I care.